

# Excuses for Angels by Another Name: How “Agency Metonymy” Precludes God’s Embodiment

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## Excursus 1: The Cognitive Processing of Metonymy

This essay adopts the stance of linguists and psychologists who consider metonymy to be “first and foremost a *cognitive* phenomenon.”<sup>1</sup> Human beings’ innate cognitive ability explains why an audience can infer an unstated referent almost automatically. And it is relevant in biblical interpretation, because it enables any audience to—as one cognitive psychologist has noted—“make meaningful sense of seemingly anomalous and disconnected statements in texts.”<sup>2</sup>

One might surmise that the construal of agency metonymy involves extra cognitive processing, relative to a straightforward (“literal”) construal. Isn’t a text’s literal meaning ascertained first, before other possible meanings are figured out? Mustn’t an interpreting mind start from the character’s name (or cognomen) as referring only to that character, before broadening its application to the agency relationship? The short answer is no, for several reasons.

As an utterance (text) is being taken in, the mind entertains all known and plausible interpretive possibilities along the way. While listening or reading, the audience is making guesses incrementally as to the utterance’s intended meaning—and updating those guess during the process. As the neuroscientist William Marslen-Wilson concluded in a classic study, “each word, as it is heard in the context of normal discourse, is immediately entered into the processing system at *all* levels of description, and is simultaneously analyzed at

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1. Jeannette Littlemore, *Metonymy: Hidden Shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 8; similarly Antonio Barcelona, “Reviewing the Properties and Prototype Structure of Metonymy,” in *Defining Metonymy in Cognitive Linguistics: Towards a Consensus View*, edited by Reka Benczes, Antonio Barcelona, and Francisco Jose Ruiz de Mendoza Ibanez (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2011), 7–58; Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden, “Introduction,” in *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, edited by Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1999), 9; Raymond Gibbs, “Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy,” in *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, 61–76.

2. Gibbs, “Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy,” 69.

these levels in the light of whatever information is available at each level at that point in the processing of the sentence.”<sup>3</sup> Another classic study by the cognitive scientists Marta Kutas and Steven Hillyard showed that sentence interpretation is a function of the audience’s expectation.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, keep in mind that agency metonymy is a matter of *reference*, not of word sense—that is, semantics. (Whenever a speaker uses a term to refer to someone, the audience must ascertain the intended reference apart from determining that word’s sense. Resolution of a reference is not limited to that referring term’s sense in isolation; it is always a function of context.) In particular, our interpretation of proper nouns apparently takes into account our world knowledge of the possibility—or even likelihood—of that named individual’s being represented by another party. That is, the audience will construe a reference to an individual as if it includes agents (whether known or potential) as part of that individual’s penumbra.

Because heretofore agency metonymy has not been a recognized conceptual category, no studies on its cognitive processing appear to have been undertaken. However, we can reason by analogy from studies on the interpretation of other nonliteral utterances, including conventionalized metonymies. And those that have been studied do *not* appear to be more computationally “costly” than literal usage. Psycholinguistic studies have shown that *familiar* noun metonymies do not take any longer for the mind to process.<sup>5</sup> To give two examples:

“she read Dickens” (where *Dickens* refers to his written works)

VERSUS

“she met Dickens” (where *Dickens* refers literally to the author)

3. Marslen-Wilson, “Sentence Perception as an Interactive Parallel Process,” *Science* 189 (1975), 226.

4. Kutas and Hillyard, “Brain Potentials During Reading Reflect Word Expectancy and Semantic Association,” *Nature* 307/12 (1984).

5. Piñango et al., “Metonymy as Referential Dependency”; Bott et al., “The Time Course of Familiar Metonymy,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 42/7 (2016), 1160–70; Weiland et al., “The Role of Literal Meaning in Figurative Language Comprehension: Evidence from Masked Priming ERP,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8 (2014), Art. 583; McElree et al., “Deferred Interpretations: Why Starting Dickens is Taxing but Reading Dickens Isn’t,” *Cognitive Science* 30 (2006), 181–92; Steven Frisson and Martin J. Pickering, “The Processing of Metonymy: Evidence from Eye Movements,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 25/6 (1999), 1366–83; cf. Rachel Giora, “Literal vs. Figurative Language: Different or Equal?” *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002), 487–506; idem, “On the Priority of Salient Meanings: Studies of Literal and Figurative Language,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 31 (1999), 919–29; Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., “Literal Meaning and Psychological Theory,” *Cognitive Science* 8 (1984), 275–304.

“he phoned the library” (where *library* refers to institutional staff)

VERSUS

“he passed the library” (where *library* refers literally to a building).

Those metonymic usages rely upon the audience to already know, respectively, that Dickens was a well-regarded author, and that library buildings contain staff people with telephones.<sup>6</sup> So, too, agency metonymies in biblical texts surely relied upon the ancient audience to know that *both kings and deities* regularly dispatched messengers on errands.

Thus we have grounds to conclude that instances of truly conventional metonymy are processed automatically and reliably. As the cognitive psychologist Raymond Gibbs notes,

inferring a [conventional] metonymic target does, as a rule, not pose any problem to the hearer because the conceptual relationship that holds between a given vehicle and its target is well-established.<sup>7</sup>

In effect, we treat a *conventional* alternation (here, a metonym) as a semantic matter—and thus seek an alternate *sense* of the term that suits the context of use—even though its application is pragmatically motivated.<sup>8</sup>

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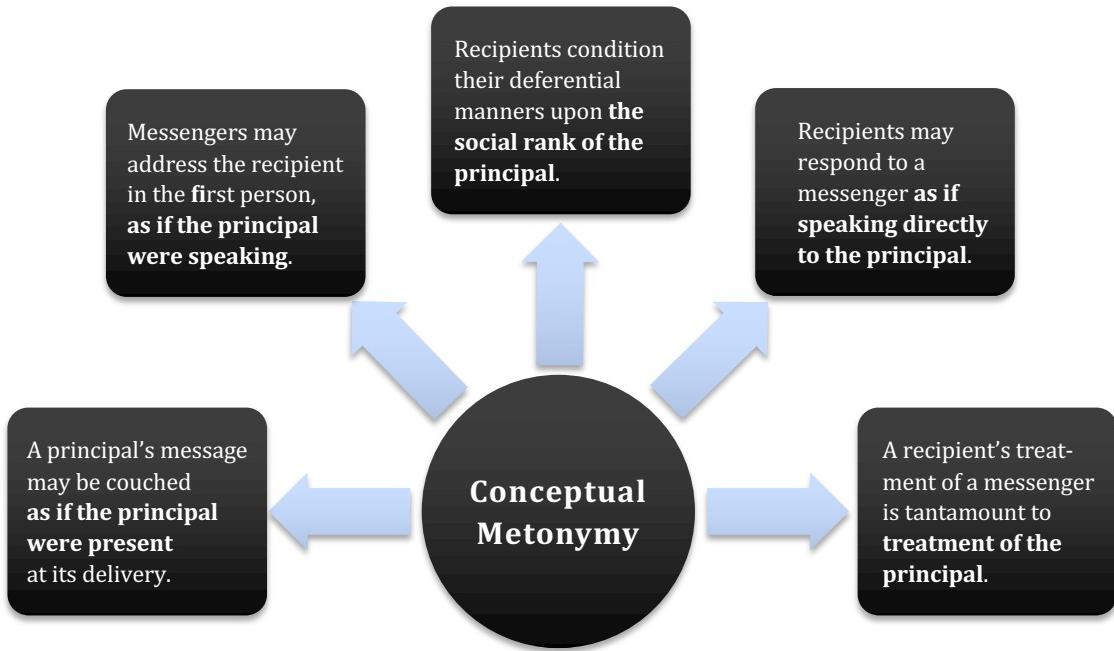
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6. This type of metonymy is usually categorized as a model of reference in which “one part stands for another part” and thus replaces it in the mental discourse model (Littlemore, *Metonymy*, 22). However, it can also be understood as a “one part stands for the whole” conceptual metonymy, in which the “whole” is (in our examples) “the author with his oeuvre” or “the institution with its edifice.” To that extent, it is akin to agency metonymy, in which a reference to the principal in effect stands for “the principal with any agents.”

7. “Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy,” 59.

8. See Geoffrey Nunberg, “The Pragmatics of Deferred Interpretation,” in *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, edited by Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 351–54.

## Excursus 2: Diagram of Agency Metonymy Conventions



This diagram illustrates the conceptual coherence behind the dozens of instances of various agency conventions that the Hebrew Bible used to depict human activity (see excursus 3). These conventions have been confirmed by their consistency with other ancient Near Eastern messaging protocols (see excursus 4).

Although such conventions have been noticed by both premodern commentators and modern biblical scholars, my work seems to be the first to “connect the dots” by showing how these conventions are mutually supporting and must derive from a common conception. Furthermore, the lines of evidence are mutually reinforcing—and thus the overall result is robust.

Even so, the existence of some of these intrahuman conventions has been denied outright. Some scholars acknowledge them for humans but deny that they apply to the depiction of the Deity’s apparently superhuman messengers. In scholarly treatments of angels, these conventions are mostly ignored. See further excursus 8, “Divine Agents in the Light of Human Agents.”

### Excursus 3: Table of “Agency Metonymy” Conventions in the Human Domain

#### *Regarding Agents in General*

1	A narrator (or speaker) may refer to an agent’s action as if it were the principal’s action (e.g., using the principal’s name to refer to both parties at once).	Gen 21:30; 42:24; Exod 14:6; Num 15:36; 21:21; 32:2; Judg 11:17, 19; 16:19; 20:12; 1 Sam 20:31; 23:5; 26:11–12; 1 Kgs 6:14; 2 Kgs 23:16; Zech 7:2; Ruth 4:17; 2 Chr 7:5
2	Principals can refer to an agent’s deed as if it were their own.	Gen 21:30 (cf. 26:15); 30:5–6; Exod 2:9; 2 Sam 12:28; 20:21; 1 Kgs 5:22–23; 20:34
3	Agents are typically identified by others in terms of their principal, and they typically self-identify in that way.	Gen 24:34; 1 Sam 25:40; Num 22:9–10; Josh 9:8–11

#### *Regarding Messengers in Particular*

4	A narrator (or speaker) may call a messenger by the principal’s name while the mission is underway.	Num 20:19; Judg 11:19; 2 Sam 5:1; cf. 2 Chr 2:11
5	A narrator (or speaker) may refer to a messenger in terms of the principal (via an epithet, pronoun, or verbal inflection) while the mission is underway.	Gen 37:32; 38:25; 50:16–17; Exod 18:6; 1 Sam 16:19; 2 Sam 2:5; 10:5 (= 1 Chr 19:5); 11:5; 12:27; 1 Kgs 20:10
6	A principal’s message may be couched as if the principal were present at its delivery.	2 Kgs 18:31 (cf. v. 17)
7	Messengers may address the message’s recipient as if the principal were speaking.	Gen 44:10 (cf. v. 17); Josh 2:14b, 18a; Judg 11:19; 1 Sam 16:19; 2 Sam 12:27
8	Recipients condition their deferential manners (gestures and speech) upon the social rank of the principal—not that of the messenger.	Gen 43:20; 44:7; 1 Sam 25:41
9	Recipients may respond to a message by addressing the messenger as a stand-in for the principal (i.e., as if speaking directly to the principal).	Gen 44:10; Judg 11:13; 1 Sam 25:41; 2 Sam 3:13; 1 Kgs 20:4; 2 Kgs 3:7
10	A recipient’s treatment of a messenger is tantamount to treatment of the principal, in terms of showing respect or disrespect.	Gen 24:30–31; 1 Sam 25:10–17; 2 Sam 10:1–6

Source: Adapted and revised from an earlier paper.<sup>9</sup>

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9. David E. S. Stein, “The Iceberg Effect: The Previously Unrecognized Role of Conventional Figures of Speech and Other Commonplaces in Biblical Depictions of God’s Operation via Agents, and Their English Translation”; paper presented to the Metaphor Theory and the Hebrew Bible section, Society of Biblical Literature; Atlanta, 24 November 2015.

#### Excursus 4: Metonymy across Languages

If agency metonymy was indeed an automatic construal in the ancient Near East, how is it that competent modern scholars overlooked it for so long?

The cognitive linguist Jean Littlemore has mused about how audiences can misconstrue metonymy. She observes that they may not know the rules of the game, so to speak:

The most common misinterpretations occur when a metonymically intended meaning is taken literally or metaphorically.... Misinterpretations are ... more likely to occur in communication with people who have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary biblical scholars certainly possess “different cultural and linguistic backgrounds” from the text’s composers. Thus it might be no surprise if some of us misinterpret the ancient narrative conventions that do not happen to have precise correspondences in our native languages.

In the Hebrew Bible, agency metonymy was conventionalized in *a much wider range of situations* than is acceptable in English and other European languages. This state of affairs should be placed in a cross-linguistic context.<sup>11</sup> Although metonymy is a universal cognitive phenomenon, *particular* metonymic conventions are known to be language-specific. For example, both in Chinese and in Hebrew—but not in English—it is conventional to refer to an elderly person (or old age) by the noun that literally describes “gray hair.”<sup>12</sup> That usage is metonymic: a distinctive part of the person is used to stand for the whole.

To give another example, the linguists Rita Brdar-Szabó and Mario Brdar surveyed the metonymic usages of the name of a given capital city in English, German, Croatian, and Hungarian (for example, “London opted not to participate in the negotiations”). They found that not all of the known types of referential metonymy were available in all four languages. They attributed the cross-linguistic variance to “an intricate interplay of conceptual, grammatical and discourse-pragmatic factors.”<sup>13</sup> The overall conclusion was that a given metonym does not always translate directly from one language to another.

In ancient Near Eastern societies, agency metonymies were arguably more widespread

10. *Metonymy*, 2.

11. On cross-linguistic variations in metonymy, see the literature review and discussion in Littlemore, *Metonymy*, 162–69.

12. The Hebrew metonym drafts the noun סִבָּה seivah (Prov 16:31; 20:29) to refer to old age (Gen 25:8; Judg 8:32; Ps 92:15; Ruth 4:15). For the Chinese usage, see Weiwei Zhang, Dirk Speelman, and Dirk Geeraerts, “Cross-linguistic variation in metonymies for person: A Chinese-English contrastive study,” *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 13/1 (2015), 220–56.

13. “Referential Metonymy across Languages: What Can Cognitive Linguistics and Contrastive Linguistics Learn from Each Other?” *International Journal of English Studies* 3/2 (2003), 102.

than we are accustomed to today. This differential in the usage frequency is a function of both language and culture.<sup>14</sup> Can biblical scholars now accept that differential for what it is—without judging those ancient usages to be deficient?<sup>15</sup> It remains to be seen.

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### Excursus 5: Critique of Sommer's Methodology

Regarding the last example passage that the main essay treated (Judg 6:11–24), the gist of Sommer's interpretation was theological:

a small-scale manifestation of God or ... a being with whom Yhwh's self overlaps.<sup>16</sup>

Sommer apparently defaulted to a literal construal of participant references after rejecting only one alternative approach, namely “to see all anthropomorphic or mythopoeic language in scripture as necessarily and inevitably metaphorical.”<sup>17</sup> In so doing, he referenced certain ruminations by Ithamar Gruenwald and by Michael Fishbane.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, those authors were not addressing the phenomenon of *metonymic reference*. It is not clear whether his decision in favor of a literal construal of word senses included a separate

14. In the ancient Near East, someone who was dictating a message to a messenger would address the recipient (if of equal or lower social status) directly. A hypothetical example: “Tell him: ‘You must come home right away.’” As a matter of convention, the ancients treated the intermediary metonymically—as being tantamount to the recipient in that respect. That practice may seem odd to us nowadays, given that when we transmit a message via a third party, we conventionally express it more obliquely: “Tell him that he must come home right away.” Metonymy is not licensed. However, when we transmit a message via *voice mail*, we do conventionally express it directly—despite the fact that we are nonetheless addressing our recipient via an intermediary. In that setting, we do license metonymy. In other words, the ancient practice of direct address in messaging was just as “natural” and “logical” as how we approach voice mail nowadays.

15. Even with regard to human–human interactions, the Bible’s unfamiliar agency conventions have struck some modern scholars as bizarre (e.g., Aubrey R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* [1961], 4–5, 11, 28–30). Thus J. W. Rogerson observed in 1992 that “twenty years ago there was broad agreement in OT study [that] the intellectual life of the ancient Israelites was thought in many ways to resemble that of ‘primitives’: [hence] *the personality of one person could merge into that of another* so that, for example, a messenger was simply an extension of the personality of whoever had given him the message” (“Anthropology and the OT,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 1:259; emphasis added).

16. *The Bodies of God*, 42–43.

17. Ibid., 178n37.

18. Gruenwald, “God the ‘Stone/Rock’: Myth, Idolatry, and Cultic Fetishism in Ancient Israel,” *JR* 76/3 (1996); Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12–22, 72–74, 81–82.

consideration of reference. In any case, Sommer seems to have built his interpretive edifice upon too narrow a base.

Given that he was construing the references to God literally, Sommer then attended to the question of what would have conditioned the ancient audience's interpretation.<sup>19</sup> He speculated that the apparent "bodily" conflation of a divine principal with his/her agent was conceivable to them, due to a "fluidity" in ancient Near Eastern imaging of deities. Ironically, those were the same grounds that the present author had previously used to show that the text's original audience could have construed its deity as being *disembodied* and *beyond gender altogether*.<sup>20</sup>

On Sommer's misconstrual of rabbinic plain-sense commentators, see excursus 6.

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#### **Excursus 6: Agency Metonymy within the History of Biblical Interpretation**

To situate my recognition of agency metonymy within the history of biblical interpretation, let us note what three of the classical plain-sense rabbinic interpreters had to say about the last two examples that the main essay treated, in Genesis 19 and Judges 6.

Although those commentators did not remark upon Lot's wording per se, they did comment a few sentences later, where the narrator says basically what Lot says. Verse 24 states that *Yhwh* rained down fire and destroyed the city. This wording creates the same participant-reference problem, given the agents' prior report that it was they who were going to do the deed. Samuel ben Meir (known as "Rashbam," early 12th century) resolved the problem by remarking that in this instance *Yhwh* "refers to Gabriel" (alluding to a classical midrashic identification of one of the angels involved). Similarly yet more categori-

19. To Sommer's credit, by his recognition that the ancient frame of reference must be taken into account when interpreting the text, he at least avoided one of the fatal flaws of Esther Hamori's argument (*When Gods Were Men; "Divine Embodiment in the Hebrew Bible"*). The latter indulged in the fallacy of literalism by discounting the audience's frame of reference. In particular, her monograph identified in two passages of Genesis an *unannounced* divine embodiment ("human theophany") motif. Only an audience already familiar with such a convention could notice such a thing. Yet according to Hamori's own findings, this motif is unattested anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible or the ancient Near East. The absence of any evidence for such a convention leaves "human theophany" without support as a matter of the biblical text's plain sense, quite apart from the widely attested convention of agency metonymy discussed in the present essay. See further my book review (2009).

20. See David E. S. Stein, "On Beyond Gender: The Representation of God in the Torah and in Three Recent English Renditions," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 15 (2008): 108–37. (Sommer did not cite or engage that piece.) The case is newly summarized in Stein, "Notes on Gender in Translation," prepared for The Jewish Publication Society (rev. 2024), 19–21. Further assessment of what the concept of fluidity justifies is beyond the scope of this essay.

cally, David Kimhi (“Radak,” late 12th century) cited what I am calling agency metonymy, remarking: “**המֶלֶךְ נִקְרָא בְּשֵׁם אֲדוֹנָיו**” “the messenger is called by the name of his master.”

As for Judges 6, a construal according to agency metonymy matches the 12th-century interpretation of Abraham Ibn Ezra. (For ease in presentation, both versions of his commentary are combined below.) As he himself noted, his remarks on the similar situation with Moses at the burning bush can be applied also to this passage in Judges. His explanation of the labeling in Exod 3:4 and 3:7 sheds light on Judg 6:14, 16, and 23, with regard to what the name *Yhwh* refers to:

4. וַיַּרְא יְיָ – וַיִּקְרָא הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּשֵׁם הַנָּכְבָד.  
וְכֹה הַמֶּלֶךְ שֶׁנֶּרֶא לְגָדֻעָן, וְשֵׁם כְּתוּב: וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יְיָ.

4. “Yahweh saw” — The messenger is called by the honored Name [of God; cf. Deut 28:58].  
(So too with the messenger who presents to Gideon: “Yahweh said to him....” [Judg 6:23])

7. וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ – הַשְׁלִיחָה יְדַבֵּר בְּלֶשׁוֹן שׂוֹלֵחַ.

7. “Yahweh said” — The agent now articulates the wording of the One who sent him.

while Judg 6:14 and 16 are likewise illuminated by his explanation of the first-person wording in the messages recounted in Exod 3:6 and 3:7:

6. וַיֹּאמֶר אָנֹכִי – כִּי הַשְׁלִיחָה יְדַבֵּר בְּדִבְרֵי הַשׁוֹלֵחַ.

6. “He said, ‘I am...’” — An agent [typically] speaks as if it were the principal’s words.

7. רָאָה רָאִיתִי – אֱלֹהִים דְּבָרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ.

7. “I have noticed” — These are the messenger’s words.

Benjamin Sommer displayed some awareness of the agency-related issues when discussing (and discounting) the remarks of Rashbam and Ibn Ezra:

The relationship among the conception [sic] of *mal’akh* in many of the passages I discuss is already noticed by Rashbam and ibn Ezra. They shy away from accepting the conclusion that *Yhwh* is the angel, instead claiming that in these passages, an especially important angel is called *Yhwh*, after the deity who sent him. (Similarly, when reporting the speech of a captain who is passing on an order of a general, a narrator might write, “The general ordered....” even though the general is not present.)<sup>21</sup>

In my view, however, those two commentators were not “shying away” from anything, but rather pointing out the agency metonymy. Unfortunately, Sommer relied upon the interpretation of Martin Lockshin, who considered the views of those medieval rabbis to be inconsistent and awkward attempts at theological “harmonization.”<sup>22</sup> In these cases, an

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21. *The Bodies of God*, 201, n25.

22. Samuel Ben Meir and Martin I. Lockshin, *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir’s Commentary on Genesis: An Annotated Translation* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), at Gen 18:1–2 and Exod 3:1–4.

otherwise perceptive Lockshin missed the point of what they were saying, because he refused to accept the notion that proper nouns—especially God’s personal name—could ever sensibly refer to someone other than their bearer. Nonetheless, names often do so, not only in biblical Hebrew but also in English usage.

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### Excursus 7: The Cognitive Entrenchment of Agency Considerations

An indicator of the pervasiveness of agency metonymy in the ancient Near East is this statement from the victory prism of King Sennacherib of Assyria, with regard to King Hezekiah of Judah (col. 3, line 49; cf. 2 Kgs 18:13–16): “In order to … do obeisance as a slave, he sent his personal messenger.”<sup>23</sup> After that Judahite agent had groveled at the emperor’s feet, all parties could then state that the king himself had done so.

Agency metonymy accords with the thoroughly hierarchical ancient Near Eastern social order, wherein a subordinate can be tasked to represent the interests of a superior. (In the Bible, see, e.g., Mic 7:6; Ps 123:2; Prov 30:21–23.) It was rehearsed regularly in the linguistic conventions of deferential speech (such as characters’ designating themselves as “your servant” when speaking with a social superior) and the nonverbal conventions of bowing and prostration—which required the continual awareness and rehearsal of social status. These practices are known not only from the Bible but also from the Lachish Letters and other epigraphy.

Every Israelite was conceived of as either a master or a servant of someone else on an ongoing basis.<sup>24</sup> Hence practically everyone viewed themselves as either a principal or an agent, as a regular matter. The entrenchment and salience of agency awareness goes even beyond John Greene’s sweeping conclusion about messengers, as having been

ubiquitous throughout this area [the ancient Near East]; they were an integral part of its warp and woof. They were there in all aspects of its social, political and religious life. They were there in all types of literature.<sup>25</sup>

Agency was everywhere. Consequently, agency metonymy could hardly be far behind.

23. As quoted in John T. Greene, *The Role of the Messenger and Message in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 14; similarly Daniel David Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924), 34.

24. J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 70–71; Revell, *Designation of the Individual*, 36–40.

25. Greene, *Role of the Messenger and Message*, 40.

## Excursus 8: Divine Agents in the Light of Human Agents

- *Ancient Near Eastern messenger deities behave like human messengers.*

The conventions for intrahuman agency transactions are consistent with the practices of deities as depicted in mythological texts in Egypt, Ugarit, and Mesopotamia. That is, such deities engage messengers who deliver messages to other deities; and in so doing, the participants follow the usual messaging protocols. Thus Samuel Meier concluded that messenger deities “all behave in a fashion similar to their human counterparts who function as messengers on earth for all humans, from royalty to commoners.”<sup>26</sup>

- *God’s messengers are not depicted as exempt from intrahuman messenger protocols.*

An observer might surmise that the world of deities differs from the world of messengers, to the extent that the human agency protocols do not apply. Yet let us adopt the *principle of parsimony* as formulated (in a different context) by Michael Fishbane. Namely,

a ... topic ... known from a certain cultural sphere, like the ancient Near East, should be assumed to have that same literary effect or value ... in all its various occurrences unless there is a marked reason for thinking otherwise.<sup>27</sup>

Only a few of the human agency commonplaces were obviously inconsistent with the basic characteristics of deities. Messenger activity in the divine realm lacked certain features found among humans—a distinction that derived from the presumption that deities were *immortal* and could *travel freely*. Hence unlike with a human messenger, no one would be attempting to rob or kill or kidnap a messenger deity. As Meier observes:

The provision of escorts for human messengers was a common courtesy, if not a necessity, for safe or trouble-free communication. Passports and the circumvention of bureaucratic hurdles were persistent features of human communication. Provision for lodging and meals along an extended route was a necessity. None of these aspects of human communication reappears in depictions of divine messenger activity.<sup>28</sup>

Such distinctions, however, have no bearing on the passages discussed in this essay.

- *God’s messengers do what intrahuman messengers do, despite the claims otherwise.*

Some scholars have argued that angels are so unlike other messengers that they share only the label ְאֵלָהִים in common. Consequently, there is no justification for assuming that depic-

26. Meier, “Angel of Yahweh,” *DDD*, 53.

27. Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 17. His principle applies Occam’s Razor to the task at hand.

28. Meier, “Angel I,” *DDD*, 46–47.

tions of divine messengers should be construed like the depictions of human ones. However, those claims of irreconcilable differences do not withstand scrutiny.

Alexander Rofé intentionally ignored all human-to-human agency conventions in his 1969 dissertation that treated biblical narratives about a מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה. He claimed to have considered human messaging conventions. Without any presentation or discussion of evidence, he claimed that certain patterns of angelic behavior “are not characteristic of the many places where messengers of flesh and blood are mentioned.”<sup>29</sup> Yet the patterns that he named are indeed amply attested—and therefore can be considered narrative conventions (see ##1, 5, and 7 in my table of depicting intrahuman messenger behavior in excursus 3).

Similarly, Dorothy Irvin, in her 1970 dissertation, denied that any מַלְאָךְ in the Genesis accounts functioned as a messenger per se. In her view, the depictions of those biblical figures simply do not match what messengers do. Conversely, those figures did not deliver any actual messages; rather, when they spoke, they were speaking only for themselves. On both counts, she argued, the angels cannot be considered “messengers” at all.<sup>30</sup>

Crucially, Irvin did not compare the מַלְאָכִים of interest in the Genesis accounts to any human מַלְאָכִים (only to messenger deities in ancient Near Eastern literature). My own comparison shows that the Bible indeed attributes *all* of the angelic roles that she identified also to non-deities—either to humans labeled as a מַלְאָךְ or to God’s human agents.<sup>31</sup> Hence the claim is not supportable that only deities do such things (and not their agents).

As for Irvin’s claim that God’s מַלְאָכִים did not deliver any messages, this conclusion was the result of having overlooked the phenomenon of agency metonymy. After having discounted the convention that the label *mal’ak X* means “messenger of party X,” and construing all of the narratives’ participant references literally, it is little wonder that she was unable to distinguish the agent from the principal.<sup>32</sup>

29. Rofé, *Angels in the Bible: Israelite Belief in Angels as Evidenced by Biblical Traditions* [Hebrew], 2nd edn. (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2012), 16. This assessment then led Rofé to explain in theological and historical terms the apparent anomalies regarding the depiction of God’s divine agents (angels), while citing numerous 19th- and 20th-century scholars whose lead he was following.

30. Irvin, *Mytharion*, 20, 94, 99, 103. She studied the six “angel/messenger” stories in Genesis 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, and 28.

31. *Roles of humans labeled as מַלְאָךְ*: rescuing someone (2 Sam 3:14–16); testing someone (1 Sam 25:5–8, 14; 2 Kgs 9:17–21); and punishing someone (1 Sam 19:11; 2 Kgs 6:32; Prov 17:11; Eccl 5:5). *Roles of God’s human agents*: predicting a child’s birth and fate (1 Kgs 13:2; 2 Kgs 4:16; Isa 7:14); rescuing (1 Kgs 17:20; 2 Kgs 4:32–35); testing (1 Kgs 13:11–26; Isa 6:8–10); and punishing (1 Sam 15:32–33).

32. Irvin’s conclusion was also the result of overlooking another convention; see below, note 35.

Notably, Samuel Meier, in his encyclopedia entries, cites (only) Irvin when he states:

It must be underscored that the angel of YHWH in these perplexing biblical narratives does not behave like any other messenger known in the divine or human realm. Although the term ‘messenger’ is present, the narrative itself omits the indispensable features of messenger activity.<sup>33</sup>

For example, regarding Gideon’s interlocutor (*Judg 6:11–23*, discussed in the main essay), Meier finds it vexing that “the figure speaks but never claims to have been sent from Yahweh nor to be speaking words that another gave him.”<sup>34</sup> Yet that state of affairs was actually the biblical norm: the Bible often elides messengers’ statements that identify their sender—precisely because doing so was such a familiar, and indeed required, part of the messaging script that it could go without saying.<sup>35</sup>

In short, the characteristics that ostensibly make a *שְׁנִיר* unique are matters of *depiction* (conventions of communication) rather than of *innate nature* (character); all of them can be explained as matters of conventional metonymy.

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### Excursus 9: The Priority of Metonymic Construal

If a speaker says something that is implausible when construed literally, the audience will typically assume that the speaker means to convey more than is being said. Some unstated added meaning is inferred in order for the audience to maintain the basic assumption of communication: the speaker—in bothering to speak at all—is attempting to convey something other than nonsense.<sup>36</sup>

When we interpret an utterance (or text) in terms of its *informativeness*, we do so according to what we were expecting. The linguist Yan Huang articulates the consensus among pragmaticists that human beings interpret according to “the most stereotypical and explanatory expectation given our knowledge about the world.”<sup>37</sup> Thus when an audience

33. Meier, “Angel I,” 49.

34. Meier, “Angel of Yahweh,” 55; he uses the term “vexing” on p. 53.

35. See section 2 and excurses 2–6 in Stein, “Cognitive Factors as a Key to Plain-Sense Biblical Interpretation: Resolving Cruxes in Gen 18:1–15 and 32:23–33,” *Open Theology* 4 (2018): 545–589, here 548–550; 576–580; doi:10.1515/ophth-2018-0043.

36. George Yule, *Pragmatics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 35–46.

37. “Neo-Gricean Pragmatic Theory of Conversational Implicature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Analysis*, ed. Bernd Heine and Heiko Narrog, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 623.

encounters a violation of the norms of communication, it assumes that exception to be *meaningful*—and then strives to make sense of it by ascribing unstated meaning to it.

Compared to metonymic construal of the references in our examples, a literal construal requires *additional* assumptions in order to yield a sensible interpretation. However, added assumptions (even if they are more realistic than my fanciful suppositions that people were known to pop out of a chest like a jack-in-the-box, or that long-dead patriarchs could miraculously be revived) have the effect of reducing the overall plausibility. As the human mind strives to make (plain) sense of a text or utterance, it prefers the construal that is the most *economical*.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, to the extent that a probability judgment is involved in deciding between the two construals,<sup>39</sup> the metonymy construal would have been seen as *more probable* than the literal construal.

Furthermore, in order to be rigorous about how construal of communication works in practice, we should also take into account the audience's assessment of *potential alternative* formulations. If a literal meaning had been intended for the anomalous participant references, the text's composer(s) would have needed to signal that intent *more explicitly*—for it would deviate from expectation, as a violation of both social and linguistic conventions. To overcome the audience's interpretive preference for metonymic construal, more clues would have been needed, such as a hypothetical mention that *God came down in the form of an angel*.

Marking a deviation from expectation in agency situations is exemplified by Ezek 43:6, in the midst of a long passage in which a divine agent (שְׁנִיאָר) has been giving the prophet a tour of the future temple. In the first half of the verse, the prophet describes his having noticed that speech was coming from the direction of the divine Presence (or Glory), and then he hastens to note how unexpected this was, given that his tour guide was still present: וְאֵישׁ הִיא עָמַד אֶצְלִי “yet the [discourse-active, situationally unique] figure was standing beside me.”

The fact that such clues are not provided in other passages involving the Deity's agents (such as Genesis 18–19) thus further suggests that a literal construal of the label *Yhwh* is not intended. (Technically, my claim is an argument from silence. However, it reflects how

38. In effect, this decision rule is an application of Occam's Razor. The main essay (n. 50) adduced two fields of study: psycholinguistics, where the principle has been confirmed in human experiments, and literary theory. Here, a third field can be added: computational linguistics, where the same notion has been modeled and field-tested (Hobbs, “Abduction,” 732).

39. As modeled by Noah D. Goodman and Michael C. Frank, “Pragmatic Language Interpretation as Probabilistic Inference,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 20.11 (2016), 818–29.

human beings naturally interpret someone's utterance: we assess that utterance against potential alternative expressions that might be expected in that situation.<sup>40)</sup>

Consequently, the text's composers had ample reason to conclude in advance that their audience would have construed their wording as a conventional agency metonym by default. For some audience expectations could be considered reliable due to social conventions known to the biblical text's composers. Presumably the latter took into account that common ground when deciding how to handle the various aspects of a story: which ones to mention, or to highlight, or to only hint at—or to leave unexpressed. And that is what justifies my conclusion as a contemporary interpreter.

Interpreting in light of second-order (recursive) calculations more closely approximates how human beings communicate than does a strictly linear model of “it means what it says.” Speakers choose what to say (and not say) based on their assumptions as to what their target audience will reliably take for granted, and upon the latter’s predictable expectations for the discourse. As Paul Noble has explained:

A text is an instantiation of some particular language-system, with reference to which the author made certain choices . . . in such a way as to express the desired meaning. It will therefore be through interpreting a text *in relation to the milieu of its production* that the most worthwhile meanings will be found in it.<sup>41</sup>

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#### Excursus 10: Implications of Metonymy for Other Passages Involving God's Agents

Whenever the Bible depicted someone as operating via agents, the ancient audience possessed a ready-made cognitive frame for construing those depictions, namely agency. That frame then evoked audience expectations for certain linguistic conventions.

In the following cases (and perhaps others) that depict God's communications with human beings, scholars have raised questions about either *participant-reference tracking* or *the recipient's state of knowledge*, or both. As this excursus will show, construing these cases

40. Leon Bergen, Noah Goodman, and Roger Levy, “That’s What She (Could Have) Said: How Alternative Utterances Affect Language Use,” *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society* 34 (2012): 120.

41. Paul R. Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 197; emphasis added. For an exemplar of this approach within biblical studies, see Philip S. Esler, “The Role of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1–2:21: Understanding a Biblical Narrative in Its Ancient Context,” in *Kontexte der Schrift: Wolfgang Stegemann zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Christian Strecker (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005).

via two intrahuman agency commonplaces (namely, agency metonymy<sup>42</sup> and the messaging script<sup>43</sup>) readily yields a coherent and meaningful result.

### *Genesis 16:7–13 (Hagar at the Well)*

- In verse 8, the narrator relates that Hagar is being addressed by a מֶלֶךְ־יְהוָה (“the LORD’s messenger”), but how does she herself know this? Here is an instance of reliance upon the ubiquitous messaging script: it goes without saying that Hagar knows who the messenger’s principal is.<sup>44</sup> This explains why she promptly admits the self-incriminating fact that she is a runaway slave (v. 8).
- In verse 10, this מֶלֶךְ speaks for God in the first person, which is conventional agency metonymy.
- In verse 13, following the exchange between Hagar and the angel, the narrator refers to יְהוָה הַדֹּבֵר אֲלֵיכָם (“the LORD who spoke to her,” NJPS). This is an instance of agency metonymy: a party may refer to an agent’s action as if it were the principal’s action (e.g., using the principal’s name to refer to the agent). With this metonym, the narrator claims that as the angel made his fateful pronouncements, he was speaking on God’s authority.
- Also in verse 13, Hagar names the site El-roi. Through an encounter with one of God’s agents, she claims to have experienced El (God) as רָאִי—as recognizing or identifying her as suited to bear Abram’s child.<sup>45</sup> Thus her mention of El is likewise an instance of agency metonymy. For knowing that a party may refer to an agent’s action as if it were the principal’s action, she uses the principal’s epithet, El, to refer to the messenger. Her metonym expresses her confidence that her interlocutor had been speaking for the deity. She believes in the authenticity of the message—and proceeds to act accordingly.

### *Genesis 18–19 (Abraham Receives Visitors)*

For extended analysis of Gen 18:1–15, see Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 553–60. What follows here are supplementary notes on this passage’s use of agency metonymy.

18:10: וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוֹב אֲשֶׁר־ The speaker is now represented by a *singular* verbal inflection, in contrast to the previous verse. Such a shift in participant reference signals that the

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42. As discussed in the body of this essay.

43. See Stein, “Cognitive Factors.”

44. See section 2 in Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 548–50.

45. This construal of the verb is activated by Hagar’s task assignment, as conveyed by the angel: go back home and bear this child. For the sense of נָאַת as “identify [someone] as suited for a certain task,” see Gen 41:33; Judg 16:1; 1 Sam 16:1, 17; 2 Kgs 10:3; Est 2:9; 1 Chr 17:17.

utterance does not apply to the group as a whole. In this case, the shift is indeed consistent with the content of the utterance: the speaker claims (in his principal's name) that only he—and not his comrades—will be visiting Abraham and Sarah next year.

V. 13: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם The sudden introduction of the name of a party not previously on the scene is the hallmark of an agency metonym. It evokes the commonplace that *a party may call a messenger by the principal's name while the mission is underway*. Convention commands that we construe the narrator as referring to the party who has already been speaking—namely, the chief agent—by labeling him in terms of his principal, as “*Yhwh*.” Here, the metonym underscores for the audience the idea that when this messenger reiterates his prediction of a most unlikely yet fateful miracle, he is continuing to speak for his principal.

(The remaining instances of the name *Yhwh* in Genesis 18 can be construed in the same manner—as agency metonyms.)

V. 17: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיךָ The syntax indicates a background circumstance. There is no time stamp. The reported utterance (vv. 17–19) could have been part of God's instruction to the chief agent upon dispatching him. It would now be recalled as germane, in order to explain what the chief agent says and does next, as he proceeds to converse with Abraham. If so, this clause would be the only instance in Genesis 18 where *Yhwh* is not necessarily a metonym for one or more of God's agents.

V. 21: אֲרָדָה־זָא וְאַרְאָה The chief agent speaks, and in the first person announces an intent to descend into the valley to reach Sodom and Gomorrah. Actually, as we learn in the next verse, he is dispatching his two subordinates to do so, while he remains to converse with Abraham. In so doing, they become agents with respect to him, even while he himself remains an agent of their superordinate principal, God. (That is, the hierarchy is nested.) Speaking now in his capacity as a principal, by agency metonymy he is entitled to refer to his agents as if he were personally carrying out the task.

הַכְּצַעַקְתָּה הַבָּאָה אֱלֹהִים This chief agent shifts into speaking in God's name *in the first person*. This is conventional agency metonymy, since the principal's identity is already known to the text's audience and to Abraham.

V. 22: וְאַבְרָהָם שׁוֹקֵן עָמָד לִפְנֵי יְהֹוָה Here the label *Yhwh* refers to the remaining visitor, to indicate that this agent will be speaking in *Yhwh*'s name. (A conventional agency metonymy.) So already Rashbam and Luzzatto.

V. 23: הַאֲרָךְ תְּסֻפָּה Abraham addresses his interlocutor as if speaking with *Yhwh* directly. This manner of communicating is licensed by agency metonymy.

V. 33: וַיַּלְּכַל The chief agent leaves promptly (v. 33), presumably in order to report back the findings to his principal (*Yhwh*)—which is part of the messaging script. As Meier has noted, “the messenger as a fact-finder, inspector or investigator is a widely attested phenomenon” (*Messenger*, 232). But even a messenger who simply announces a message (e.g., a herald) was expected to return to the principal and confirm that the mission was accomplished: “the messenger’s task was finished when the messenger had returned safely back to the point of despatch” (*ibid.*, 230–31).

(The fact that it is otherwise normal in the Bible for a messenger—whether sent by God or by a human principal—to vanish from the scene after the message is delivered can be explained as a matter of ellipsis, based on the familiar messaging script.)

19:27: הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־עָמָד שֶׁם אֲתָּה־פָנֵי יְהֹוָה Alluding to the scene depicted in 18:22. As noted above, the “face” that Abraham saw was that of the remaining visitor, with whom he conversed. Agency metonymy here provides a convenient shorthand for referring to that earlier episode that involved an agent who spoke in the Deity’s name.

### *Genesis 21:17–18 (Hagar in the wilderness of Beer-sheba)*

- In verse 17, the narrator relates that Hagar is being addressed by a מֶלֶךְ אֱלֹהִים (“God’s messenger”), but how does she herself know this? Recall that when the text’s audience already knows the sender’s identity, it goes without saying that the recipient knows this fact, as well.<sup>46</sup>
- In verse 18, this מֶלֶךְ speaks for God via the first person, which is conventional agency metonymy.

### *Genesis 22:11–14 (Abraham on Mount Moriah)*

- In verse 11, the narrator relates that Abraham is being addressed by מֶלֶךְ יְהֹוָה (“the LORD’s messenger”), but how does Abraham know this? Whenever the text’s audience already

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46. See section 2 in Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 548–50.

knows the sender's identity, it goes without saying that the recipient likewise possesses this knowledge.<sup>47</sup> This explains Abraham's immediate willingness to obey.

- In verse 12, this מלֹאך speaks for God via the first person, which is conventional agency metonymy.
- In verse 14, the narrator invokes a saying, בַּהָר ייְהוָה ("On the LORD's Mount, He makes contact").<sup>48</sup> The saying is thus cast as metonymic: the angel who had contacted Abraham (v. 11) is referenced inflectionally in terms of the principal who presumably had dispatched him. By agency metonymy, a narrator may refer to an agent's action as if it were the principal's action. This usage underscores that just as God was made apparent to their ancestor Abraham via a timely messenger, so, too, those who visit the (future) Temple can expect a sense of contact with the divine.<sup>49</sup>

### *Genesis 31:3, 11–13 (Jacob in Paddan-aram)*

- In verse 3, the narrator relates: וַיֹאמֶר ייְהוָה אֲלֵיכֶם ("the LORD said to Jacob"). Left unspecified is the means or manner of this communication. One distinct possibility is via an agent (angel), as has already occurred several times in Genesis.
- In verse 11, Jacob recounts his having been addressed (in his dream) by a מלֹאך אלֹהִים ("God's messenger"), who conveyed essentially the same message (v. 3 versus v. 13).
- E. A. Speiser (Anchor Bible commentary) exemplifies the historical-critical approach to interpretation, which views verse 3 as coming from a different documentary source ("J") than did verses 11–33 ("E"), on the basis of their differing labels for the deity.<sup>50</sup> Such a reading resolves the participant-reference challenge by abandoning the attempt to construe this passage as a cohesive text. However, given the apparent fact that a later redactor

47. See section 2 in Stein, "Cognitive Factors," 548–50.

48. On "making contact" as a sense of Niphal רָאָה, see Stein, "Cognitive Factors," 554, 585–587.

49. Earlier in verse 14, after Abraham has sacrificed a ram instead of his son, he names the site יְהוָה רָאָה. This name refers back to his own statement to his son in verse 8, where it applied to the choice of a sacrificial animal as an intermediary; but now it is also re-applied to God's implicit choice of this site as an ongoing mediating place (the site of the future Temple in Jerusalem). In this context, the name is best understood as "the LORD identifies [it]." For רָאָה in this sense of "identify [a place] as suitable," see Deut 12:13; 33:21.

50. Actually, the differing labels for the deity provide little evidence of narrative discontinuity, given that their respective utterance contexts are distinct: in verse 3, the narrator is reporting to the text's audience, whereas in verses 11–13, the character Jacob is depicted as reporting to his wives. In the latter situation, it would be more likely that the deity's identity is understood and therefore would go without saying, according to the norms of conversation.

set up the text in this manner, the discrepancy stands—and demands interpretation on its own terms. A retrospective construal of metonymy (wherein the narrator of v. 3 was referring to the agent's action as if it were the principal's action) readily and automatically yields a coherent text. Viewed as a metonym, the label *Yhwh* underscores that the agent who is speaking is indeed doing so on God's behalf.

- This is the thrust of the 12th-century annotation by the commentator David Kimḥi (RaDaQ), at verse 3: (*המֶלֶךְ נִקְרָא בְשֵׁם אֲדוֹנִי*) (“the messenger is called by the name of his master”).
- How did Jacob himself know that the figure in his dream was a *מֶלֶךְ אֱלֹהִים* (“God’s messenger”)? When the text’s audience already knows the sender’s identity, it goes without saying that the recipient also possesses this knowledge.<sup>51</sup> This explains Jacob’s immediate statement of his willingness to obey (*ibid.*).
- In verses 12–13, this *מֶלֶךְ* speaks for God via the first person. This, too, is conventional agency metonymy. The *מֶלֶךְ* identifies the principal (“the God of Beth-el”) not because Jacob is not already aware of who it is, but rather in order to clarify which identity or aspect of the divine is meant to be recognized.<sup>52</sup>
- This instance of agency metonymy, which begins with the use of God’s name without any prior mention of the agent, is *highly diagnostic*: it shows that the text’s audience was expected to anticipate the possibility of agency metonymy whenever God is mentioned as communicating with a person.

### *Genesis 32:23–33 (Jacob at the Jabbok)*

For an extended analysis of this passage, see Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 560–66.<sup>53</sup> What follows here are supplementary notes on this passage’s use of agency metonymy.

51. See section 2 in my “Cognitive Factors,” 548–50.

52. Cf. John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 92.

53. That analysis was completed in 2018, prior to my breakthrough in early 2020 as to understanding the situation-oriented nature of *עַנְנָא*. It now warrants some refinement, as follows. In 32:25, *עַנְנָא* forms a characteristic part of the narrator’s schematic depiction of the situation of interest. Its use does not profile the referent as an agent per se, as I had claimed in 2018. Rather, *עַנְנָא* simply profiles its referent as a defining participant in the depicted situation. (Its prototypical function!) That being said, its referent is nonetheless readily associated with the previously disclosed band of angels nearby, due both to the unusual suddenness of his appearance on the scene, and to the narrative’s having already created a high expectation of divine intervention via an agent. That identification as agent is *implied*, not lexical.

- After his nighttime encounter with the agent, Jacob says: “**רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָנִים אֶל-פָנִים**” (“I have seen [an] *’elōhîm* face-to-face,” v. 31). The ancient audience would readily construe such usage as agency metonymy—designating both principal and agent via naming only the former. Thereby, Jacob would be expressing his confidence that his interlocutor had been acting upon God’s instructions. (A similar concern that seeing an angel is dangerous is articulated by Gideon in Judg 6:22 and by Manoah in Judg 13:21–22, which means that Jacob’s expressed sense of risk does not in itself indicate that he was referring literally to his deity, or to literal seeing; see discussions below, *ad loc.*)
- Similar reference to God’s agents as **אֱלֹהִים** are found in many passages, including Exod 21:6; 22:7–8, 27; 32:1, 23; Judg 13:21–22; 1 Sam 28:13; Hosea 12:4–5. All of these can be explained as conventional agency metonyms. Alternatively, all such cases could be construed as instances of an extended lexical sense of **אֱלֹהִים** as “intermediary”—a sense that itself would have derived originally from such metonymic usage having become well entrenched in Israelite culture.

### *Genesis 48:15–16 (Jacob blesses Joseph’s sons)*

The singular verb of invocation **יְבָרֵךְ** refers to both God (**אֱלֹהִים**) and a particular messenger (**מֶלֶךְ**), which has suggested to most interpreters that Jacob was making an ontological identification. Rather, the identification is functional, as seen from Jacob’s perspective. He evidently believes that he has repeatedly received God’s protection via the mediation of an agent (angelic intervention), and he expects and hopes that such agency will continue. The blessing comes from God—yet is channeled through the angel, and experienced memorably in that manner. This is a matter of agency metonymy in Jacob’s mind, which conditions how he depicts his experience—and is expressed conventionally.

### *Exodus 3:1–10 (Moses at the Burning Bush)*

- In verse 2, the agent is straightforwardly identified as such—**מֶלֶךְ**—that is, as being in relationship to the named principal.<sup>54</sup> The character is introduced as a “messenger,” and a standard messaging verb is employed;<sup>55</sup> together they provide a solid frame of reference for messaging activity, guiding subsequent interpretation in those terms. Thus the fact that this particular agent takes an unusual form (“fire”) would not induce the ancient

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54. This labeling is in accord with the designation of human agents; the narrator may designate such agents specifically via a noun of agency plus a genitive that names their principal, as in Num 22:18; Judg 11:13; 1 Sam 19:20; 25:12, 42; 2 Sam 21:17; 1 Kgs 20:9.

55. On this verb **אָרוֹן**, see excursus 9 in Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 585–87.

audience to abandon well-entrenched messenger protocols in its construal of the proceedings.

- In verse 4, either of two alternative construals involving agency metonymy would yield a cohesive narrative.<sup>56</sup> For our present purposes, we need not decide between them—for either way, there is no theophany here. The easiest option to explain in passing is to construe both the mention of *Yhwh* and the term אֱלֹהִים as referring to that same messenger indirectly, via agency metonymy. The motive for such labels would be to underscore the agent's authority.<sup>57</sup> Thus it is the agent who calls Moses' name.
- In verse 6, the agent begins to deliver the actual message by speaking in the first person—as befits agency metonymy.<sup>58</sup>
- Why, as described in verse 6, was Moses afraid to look at the agent (labeled as אֱלֹהִים)? Indeed, some scholars have suggested that this reflex implies that the Deity is actually present—and that the agent is a later interpolation.<sup>59</sup> Rather, it is due to the convention (from human messaging) that one should show the same deference to an agent as one would normally show to their principal. And it was considered impertinent to look into the face of a social superior who is providing direction. Seeing an angel in itself is not deadly, but *not showing proper deference* might be—because that is tantamount to disrespecting the Deity. Compare the obeisance that was done promptly (admittedly upon

56. Actually, an audience will seek an interpretation that optimizes not only narrative cohesiveness generally but also coherence in a specific character's presentation. Thus when a narrator continues to speak about a given character, the audience expects the representations of that character to remain coherent and consistent. See Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Augsburg/Fortress, 1981) 47, 60. This motivation provides an added incentive for construing *Yhwh* as an agency metonym.

57. Alternatively, we can construe the use of the tetragrammaton as referring as usual to the Deity (who is not interacting here directly with Moses, having dispatched a messenger to do so), while the use of אֱלֹהִים refers directly to the intermediary—given an apparently entrenched secondary lexical sense of אֱלֹהִים to mean “a representative of the deity.” (See above at Gen 32:23–33.)

58. The apparent suddenness with which an agent starts speaking on the principal's behalf *in the first person* is an artifact of our unfamiliarity with ancient narrative convention. Again, the step in which the agent self-identifies (as speaking or acting on behalf of a particular party) was such a familiar part of messenger protocol that it usually went without saying in the depiction (Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 548–50). Thus a first-person delivery would have occasioned no surprise to the text's ancient audience, for this too was normal real-life practice. Its deployment in a narrative is thus optional and serves to validate authority and heighten dramatic interest.

59. See Daniel O. McClellan, *YHWH's Divine Images: A Cognitive Approach*, ANEM 29 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2022), 161–62.

facing a drawn sword) by Balaam (Num 22:31; see below) and by Joshua (Josh 5:14), and belatedly by Manoah and his wife (Judg 13:20); and contrast the fate of Uzzah in relation to the ark that likewise represents the Deity (2 Sam 6:6–7).

- In verse 7, the narrator deploys God’s name as an agency metonym. It is timely, coming just as the fateful commissioning proposal is being proffered—a proposal that radically alters the course of Moses’ life, and upon which Israel’s future depends (vv. 7–10). Such usage functions to underscore the supreme source of the agent’s authority, as this messenger proceeds to negotiate with Moses.

### *Exodus 3:7–12 (Who takes the Israelites out of Egypt?)*

- At first, in Exod 3:7–9, *Yhwh* speaks in the first person of having “come down to rescue” (וַיָּעַל הָאֱלֹהִים לְאֶרְדֵּן הַצְּלָמָיו) the suffering nation of Israel and bring them up out of Egypt (וַיִּבְרְאֶת אֱלֹהִים לְאֶרְדֵּן הַצְּלָמָיו). But then immediately God assigns Moses as an agent (לְכָה וְאֲשַׁלְחֵךְ, v. 10)—and thus directs him to be the one to actually carry it out (וְהִזְצָא אֶת־עַם בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם) “take my people out of Egypt,” ibid.; בְּהַזְצָא אֶת־הָעָם מִמִּצְרָיִם, v. 12). Thus even in the same utterance, principals may speak *both* of themselves and of their agent(s) as carrying out the mission in question; the former way of speaking is agency metonymy.
- Soon the narrator underscores that *Yhwh* had tasked Moses and Aaron with taking the Israelites out of Egypt: וַיֹּצְאֵם ... לְהַזְצָא אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם (Exod 6:13).
- Afterward, when God and Moses subsequently mention *only each other* as the party who took the Israelites out of Egypt, this is not a denial of their own involvement. Usually, this feat is attributed to the principal, not only in God’s self-reference (e.g., Exod 3:17; 20:2; 29:46; Num 15:41), but also by Moses (Exod 32:11; Deut 6:12; 9:26) and by other characters (e.g., 1 Sam 12:6; 1 Kgs 8:51; Dan 9:15). This is agency metonymy, which is apparently the unmarked means of reference. However, in those situations where Moses’ *continued involvement as God’s agent* is at stake, both God and the Israelites acknowledge *him* as the party who carried out the mission (Exod 32:1, 7, 23; 33:1; Deut 9:12). This is the marked usage that puts focus on the agent.
- Compare Num 20:16, where Moses explains to the king of Edom that *Yhwh* effected the liberation from Egypt via a מֶלֶךְ (“messenger”), a self-reference;<sup>60</sup> Josh 24:5–6, where Joshua quotes God as claiming to have “sent” Moses (as an agent) as part of liberating

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60. Jacob Milgrom’s interpretation (*JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, ad loc.)—namely, that מֶלֶךְ here refers to the angel(s) mentioned in several passage in Exodus—is less likely, given that an angel is never credited with having “brought out” the Israelites from Egypt, whereas Moses is.

the Israelites from Egypt; and 1 Sam 12:6, 8, where Samuel speaks in similar terms. In these summaries, both principal and agent receive respective credit.

### *Exodus 4:24*

- **וַיַּפְגֹּשׁ הָנָהָר וַיַּבְקֹשׁ בְּמִתּוֹ** The action described by the first verb (“encounter”) suggests the involvement of a divine agent. (Compare Gen 32:18, in which this verb is used to describe Esau’s encounter with a human agent.) If so, the label *Yhwh* is a metonym, underscoring that the agent is acting on Yahweh’s behalf. Rashbam and Ibn Ezra construe this episode in those terms. That being said, this is not a clear case of an agent on the scene.

### *Numbers 22:31–38; 23:26 (Balaam on the way to Balak)*

- In verse 31, Balaam’s act of bowing to the ground and his subsequent utterances together indicate that he recognizes who is the principal of the “**מֶלֶךְ**” who has been blocking his path. For he proceeds to say to King Balak, “I can speak only the word that **אֱלֹהִים** puts into my mouth” (v. 38); in 23:26, he reiterates his statement but uses the name *Yhwh* specifically. (Acting in accord with agency metonymy, Balaam conditions his deferential gesture and manner of speaking upon the social rank of the principal—not that of the messenger.)
- How did Balaam know the identity of the principal? It goes without saying.<sup>61</sup>
- In verse 34, when Balaam says **אָסֵרְךָ בְּעִינֵיךְ** (“If you still disapprove”; NJPS), he is addressing the messenger as a stand-in for the principal (i.e., “If You still disapprove”), as per agency metonymy.
- In verse 35, the **מֶלֶךְ** then speaks for God via the first person (**אָלִיךְ**, “[only] what I tell you to say,” echoing what **אֱלֹהִים** had said in v. 20), as per agency metonymy: messengers may address the recipient as if the principal were speaking.

### *Joshua 5:13–6:5 (Joshua at Jericho)*

- In Josh 5:13, Joshua encounters a sword-wielding **יִשְׂרָאֵל** (that is, a participant whose presence defines the schematically depicted situation). In the next verse, the divine messenger self-identifies as God’s military envoy (**שֶׁרֶץ בְּאֵל**). Joshua then expresses an expectation that he will receive a message. The envoy indeed prepares Joshua for a fateful message (v. 15). Then he delivers its actual content, instructing Joshua on military tactics (6:2–5), which this particular agent is uniquely qualified to explain.

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61. See section 2 in Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 548–50.

- In 6:2, just as this divine messenger is about to disclose the highly unusual procedure for capturing Jericho, the narrator employs a timely agency metonym, labeling him as *Yhwh*. This usage underscores that the agent is speaking for his principal.
- This metonymic construal handily resolves the participant-reference tracking challenge. It also yields a highly coherent and informative narrative—unlike the conventional scholarly interpretation of 5:13–15 as a “fragment” of an unfinished story.<sup>62</sup>

### *Judges 2:1–4 (Announcement at Bochim)*

- In verse 4, the narrator relates that all the Israelites (“**כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**”) were addressed by a messenger (“**מֶלֶךְ**”), but how did the Israelites themselves know this? Whenever the text’s audience already knows the sender’s identity, it goes without saying that the recipient(s) likewise possess this knowledge.<sup>63</sup> Here that narrative convention explains why the Israelites broke into weeping upon hearing the harsh message (v. 4).
- In verses 1–4, this messenger then speaks for God via the first person. This is conventional agency metonymy that underscores the divine source of the agent’s authority.

### *Judges 6:22–23 (Gideon’s woe)*

- On the use of agency metonymy in the main narrative (vv. 11ff.), see the main essay.
- On the import of Gideon’s delayed recognition of his interlocutor’s divine nature (v. 22), see Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 583–84. Compare also Jeremiah’s delayed recognition of a message as having truly come from the Deity, in Jer 32:6–8.
- In these two verses, why was Gideon concerned that he might die upon having encountered an angel (which he labeled “**מֶלֶךְ**”)? Does this mean that the Deity is actually present in the scene, and that the term “**מֶלֶךְ**” is a later interpolation?<sup>64</sup> No; see the discussion below on Judg 13:22.

62. The change in the designation of speaker in Jos. 6:2 (from **שְׁרַצְבָּאֵל** to *Yhwh*) is usually interpreted as marking the start of a new scene. Yet that reading leaves the previous scene without a proper ending; it finishes precipitously after Joshua removes his sandals. Joshua’s question **מַה אֲדֹנִי מְדֹבֵר אֶל־עֲבָדֶיךָ** (v. 14) is left hanging. There is no narrative resolution to the episode, and no discourse marker to signal its conclusion. Furthermore, comparison with the similar episode of Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3) suggests that an important message is about to be conveyed, which also argues against the scene’s ending with 5:15. Rather, the conjunctive **וְ** that begins the circumstantial clause in 6:1 links the preceding passage with the following one.

63. See section 2 in Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 548–50.

64. So McClellan, *YHWH’s Divine Images*, 161–62, who also cites Exod 3:6 and Judg 13:22.

### *Judges 13:2–23 (Manoah's Wife)*

- There is no agency metonymy in this narrative. Nonetheless, it warrants some remarks, because it is often cited by scholars while interpreting passages in which such metonyms do appear.
- It goes without saying that Manoah's wife knows that *Yhwh* is the principal who dispatched the “*מֶלֶךְ*” who visits her.<sup>65</sup>
- Even though the visitor looks like a *divine* agent—by her own admission—she cannot quite believe it, so she takes him for a *human* agent of the Deity. Most modern interpreters focus on what this says about angels: they can appear to be human beings! However, the ancient audience may well have been more interested in the spiritual alienation of Manoah and his wife—earnest and pious though they are: here are folks who cannot quite perceive how the divine is perceptible in their lives. Cf. Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 583–84.
- Why in v. 22 does Manoah think he might *die* for having seen an angel (labeled as *מֶלֶךְ*)? First of all, it seems unlikely that he believes mere seeing per se is the issue. Rather, the Hebrew verb *רָאָה* is often used to refer metonymically to a series of related events; being the most salient aspect, “seeing” can stand for the whole series. (As nowadays in English, the question “Have you seen a doctor?” means “Have you gone for an examination and consultation?”) Thus Manoah is probably referring to the whole communicative encounter involving the Deity as principal. When he says, “We shall surely die, for we have seen a divine being” (NJPS), he means, “We deserve to die because we have been dealing with a divine emissary of Yahweh without showing due respect—and so we must have insulted Yahweh.” See further above at Exod 3:6.

### *1 Samuel 15:18 (Samuel as messenger)*

- Samuel claims that *Yhwh* had verbally related specific instructions to King Saul, while being fully aware that it was he himself who had delivered that message to Saul, in *Yhwh*'s name (15:2–3).
- This is typical agency metonymy, in that it succinctly underscores that Samuel had been speaking for his principal.

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65. See section 2 and excursus 8 in Stein, “Cognitive Factors,” 548–50, 583–84. When Manoah's wife admits to him, “I did not ask him where he was from, nor did he tell me his name” (NJPS, v. 6), that hesitation is consistent with such facts generally being unimportant in the case of a messenger. The factors that matter most are the identity of the principal and the content of the message.

### *Isaiah 7 (Isaiah and King Ahaz)*

- In verse 3, *Yhwh* directs the prophet Isaiah to deliver a message to King Ahaz of Judah. The content of the initial message is spelled out in verses 4–9.
- An application of agency metonymy appears in verse 10, where the narrator designates Isaiah—a *human* agent of God—as *Yhwh*. That metonym signals that this agent continues to serve as God’s representative as he confronts the king. (The arc of the participant references in vv. 3, 7, and 13 implies that Isaiah is the referent in this verse as well, despite the change in designation.) Such a construal yields a cohesive narrative.
- This is an important example, since the agency metonym has been applied to a human being. Theologians’ usual tendency to construe agency metonyms literally simply won’t work here; it can hardly be the case that the narrator is “conflating” the identities of Isaiah and of Yahweh, or that Isaiah’s presence is a later interpolation into the scene.
- For other instances of *Yhwh* or אֱלֹהִים as an agency metonym to designate human beings, see the application to oracles, as noted in the main essay, note 57.

### *Zechariah 1:13*

- In Zechariah’s self-narrated visions, he encounters various divine agents of God, whom he designates as *Yhwh*, as per agency metonymy. In this first such case, that designation seems to be applied to the character previously designated both as שֵׁנִי (a defining participant in the depicted situation; vv. 8, 10) and as מֶלֶךְ יְהוָה (“*Yhwh*’s messenger”; v. 11). This figure, who is engaged in God’s service while poised on a horse “among the myrtles,” has already participated in a three-way conversation with the prophet (v. 11). The conventional metonymy comes at a key juncture in the conversation—regarding God’s attitude toward “Jerusalem and the towns of Judah.” It underscores that the agent continues to speak for the principal as he starts to describe a fateful shift in that attitude.

### *Zechariah 3:2*

- In chapter 3, the only speaker is a מֶלֶךְ יְהוָה (introduced in v. 1), whom the narrator designates in verse 2 as *Yhwh*. This is another instance of agency metonymy, which is invoked at a key juncture—namely, as the angel confronts the Accuser, who apparently has prevailed until this moment. (This construal of the designation explains the third-person references to *Yhwh* as this figure speaks.) It underscores that the agent speaks for the principal while defending the high priest Joshua.

- The 12th-century plain-sense commentator David Kimḥi (RaDaQ) makes the same remark on the usage here at 3:2 as he did at Gen 31:3 — “**המֶלֶךְ נִקְרָא בְשֵׁם אֲדוֹנִי**” (“the messenger is called by the name of his master”).
- At first glance the angel’s subsequent speech in verse 4 was a response to *Yhwh*’s speech in verse 2 (given the verb **עָנוּ**, literally “answered”). However, the first utterance was directed to the **נֶשֶׁר** and spoken in the Deity’s name, whereas the second utterance was addressed to the nearby attendants, as a response to the circumstance described in verse 3. This situation is like what Cynthia Miller describes as “when there is no preceding speech-part … [the verb **עָנוּ**] introduces a spoken response to a pragmatic situation” (*Representation of Speech*, 323–24). Having responded first to the **נֶשֶׁר**’s presence, the angel then “spoke up” in order to take care of a related matter: Joshua’s filthy garments.

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